DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 531 CS 213 921

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TITLE Collaborative Strategies That Integrate the Language Arts for Cross-Age Learning.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Cooperative Learning; *Cross Age Teaching; Elementary Secondary Education; Integrated Activities; *Language Arts; Peer Teaching; Program Descriptions; Units of Study
IDENTIFIERS Student Empowerment

ABSTRACT

The use of peers has long been beneficial to students: especially useful are cross-age projects, where students in the elementary and secondary grades engage in a common unit featuring projects separate to each grade and whole group activities. Cross-age projects are workable with careful planning in advance among teacher and administrators. Finding an expendable, yet educationally sound, topic for cross-age grouping in the language arts classroom is perhaps the more difficult task. The topic itself should be chosen first with the elementary student in mind. Topics and their accompanying activities must be selected with care and specifically tailored to each grade level. One successful topic centered around Beatrix Potter and her classic tales featuring Peter Rabbit and other characters. A cross-age unit was designed to last 16 days, with 4 of those days combining both grades--first and eighth or seventh and second). Activities within the unit incorporated the language arts skills normally taught. For cross-age projects, students should be graded upon participation and the quality of the activities completed. Although time-consuming and sometimes difficult to plan, cross-age projects more than make up for their troubles to teachers in student enjoyment, empowerment, and achievement. (Four figures that illustrate the unit in full and describe a collaborative research paper activity, a list of activities for a "Peter Rabbit Day," and a list of questions for a book review/response activity are attached.) (RS)

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Collaborative Strategies that Integrate the Language Arts for Cross-Age Learning

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RUNNING HEAD: Cross-Age Learning

CS213921

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Abstract

The use of peers has long been beneficial to students. Especially useful are cross-age projects, where students in the elementary and secondary grades engage in a common unit featuring projects separate to each grade and whole group activities. Cross-age projects provide learning, audience, caring, and self-esteem for involved students.

Incorporating the use of peers, peer grouping, and cross-age grouping has always been beneficial to the classroom. These activities are especially useful to the middle level language arts classroom when teaching writing, as students must write for an audience other than the teacher in order to make their writing truly meaningful and relevant to them; young writers want their writing to be heard. The problem, of course, is successfully incorporating this process into the classroom as a regular teaching tool rather than an isolated experiment.

Numerous educators have advocated the importance of having a consistent audience for young writers; for example, Elbow and Belanoff (1989) state that writing improves most by sharing and responding with an audience. Atwell (1987) and Calkins (1986, 1991) both call for "group share," where students learn to listen and respond to writing; writers need others while their work is still in progress as much or moreso than when the piece has been completed.

Moreover, Goldberg (1986) says that writing is also having a relationship with other writers, while Elbow (1973) states that the advantage to peer groups is diversity--working with different people. Bushman and Bushman (1986) also advocate the need for grouping, as it is a way to support the need for peer approval and garner supportive relationships among students.

A likely transition from peer groupings in self-contained classrooms is cross-age projects, where older students work with students several grades younger.

Leight and Rinehart (1992) note that one-room schools were

prime examples of cross-age learning; such benefits included learning at an individuals's own pace and a strong sense of belonging, family, and cooperation. Today's middle school movement incorporates many of the same ideas and techniques found in one-room schools by attempting to establish relationships between teacher and students through adviser/advisee programs, teaming, interdisciplinary teaching, and the like. Indeed, Doda (1991) strongly advocates multi-age grouping for middle school students. Benefits of such groupings include allowance for individual student progress, positive social skills, fewer discipline problems, and a strong bonding between students and teachers.

Graves (1983) stresses the importance of class projects which begin in one room and eventually spread to include the school and perhaps the community, and Kirby and Liner (1981) state that writers need direct contact with an audience, and elementary school children are an excellent potential audience for middle level students.

Many such successful projects where secondary or middle school students work with elementary students have been described: Silberman (1989) discusses freshmen re-writing classic books for fourth graders and presenting their work to them, Wheeler (1983) describes secondary remedial readers going to elementary schools and having elementary students read to them, and Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik (1982) describe fifth graders using wordless picture books with first graders to stimulate oral language and reading for meaning.

Although cross-age projects are worthwhile, many teachers

hesitate implementing them for various reasons, such as the planning involved, time constraints, or logistical limitations. Others may have difficulty finding a topic that will serve the needs of the elementary children while still being challenging to the secondary students. It is necessary to create a topic that will provide a variety of reading, writing and other activities for both age groups, another possible difficulty.

Logistical problems are unique to individuals; however, most will find that with careful planning in advance among teachers and administrators cross-age projects are workable. Secondary teachers may feel that such projects can only be done during the assigned class period (e.g. third hour English from 10:05-10:55), but meetings can also be scheduled before or after school, during lunch or activity periods, etc. Students may also be excused from a morning or afternoon of school in order to meet as a large group. (It should be noted that many secondary students participate in sports or other extracurricular activities that take them away from their classes; certainly a cross-age grouping project has as much, or more, value than some of those activities.)

Finding an expandable, yet educationally sound, topic for cross-age grouping in the language arts classroom is perhaps the more difficult task. Although research shows that elementary children will benefit from the presence of older students, it is important that the project be at least as educationally challenging as a regular self-contained classroom unit for both groups. Cross-age grouping projects should not be seen as "play time" "or busy work" for older and younger students, although of course most will

find them quite enjoyable.

Ideally, a cross-age topic should be wide enough to allow for a variety of multi-level activities that may be shared by both grades. Cross-age activities are not items presented to elementary children by secondary students or vice versa; they are projects with a common theme that are shared by both groups. Secondary and elementary students will ideally be working together as much as possible, sharing their writing and other activities.

The topic itself should be chosen first with the elementary student in mind--obviously, it must be suitable to their grade level. The older the child, the more sophisticated the topic, readings, and activities. However, presenting Shakespeare to first graders will not work well, no matter how much it many be watered down or colorfully presented by secondary students. Cross-age topics must be on two separate grade levels; it is the common theme, not identical content or activities, that make the topic acceptable to both groups.

Secondary students may have the most difficulty with the presented topic at first, for some may feel cross-age topics are too "childish." However, once these students realize that the topic is broad enough to incorporate creative expression on their own level, they will quickly adapt. Secondary students also soon understand that elementary students are indeed children who certainly will be learning from material different from that of their own.

Regardless of the topic chosen, it is the educator's responsibility to make the topic worthwhile to their respective

students. Topics and their accompanying activities must be selected with care and specifically tailored to each grade level.

The topic selected for presentation is centered around Beatrix Potter and her classic tales featuring Peter Rabbit and other characters. This general topic strikes a nice balance, for the stories are familiar and appreciated by both groups, there are many different stories and characters which will allow for a rich variety of activities, and the stories and related works by Potter have a high literary quality, making them worthy of study by themselves for secondary students. The adaptability and variety that can be produced by the topic is an important consideration, and this topic is a truly versatile and enjoyable one for all, including educators.

Project Description

This cross-age unit was designed to last 16 days, with four of those days combining both grades. Suggested grades chosen for this project are first and eight or seven and two. The unit may be completed at any time during the year, but due to the amount of planning involved and seasonal activities provided (planting seeds, creating gardens, spring and bunnies) spring would be an excellent time to begin the unit. Also, by this time, students are thoroughly acquainted with one another, the teacher, school routines, and are ready to branch out of their own classroom and work with others. Secondary students will also have had much practice with writing and will be anxious for the opportunity to share with a younger audience.

The supplied grid (Figure 1) illustrates the unit in full. Of

course, these specifics may easily be altered by the instructors.

As shown by the grid, both elementary and secondary students are working on grade-level projects based upon a common theme, Beatrix Potter and her stories. Each day has been planned so both sets of students are doing similar projects; common meeting times will expand upon those projects and provide for younger and older students to work together on projects designed around the common theme. An explanation of each day in the unit is as follows.

Daily Activities

The secondary teacher is responsible for the top half of the grid; the bottom half is for the elementary teacher. Each daily section has specific activities that involve both the students and teacher.

During the first day of the first week both teachers should introduce the collaborative project, then read the Tale of Peter Rabbit. The final activity for that day is to have the elementary students write an introductory letter to the secondary students, with the older students doing the same for the younger class. It is assumed that every day both teachers will spend some time reading to their students.

On the second day, the secondary students form small groups and each group reads as many of the tales as they can. Each group selects their favorite tale and one person reads this tale to the entire class. Elementary students design a book kite based upon a Potter tale. Vocabulary words from the stories should be introduced to both grades, as Potter used words in her writings that are common to the British culture, but are not used in our

language. Elementary teachers read aloud The Tale of Benjamin Bunny.

On day three, secondary students continue with their reading of Potter's works in small groups. As a group or individual project, they complete a biopoem or cinquain relating to the works read. Elementary students learn the song "Here Comes Peter Cottontail" and complete a Venn Diagram comparing Peter Rabbit to Benjamin Bunny. Once the students have completed their Venn Diagrams, they should plan to share them with the secondary students during the visitation that will occur the next day.

Day four is a collaborative day, with both groups meeting together. Introductions should be made, and elementary students are given a secondary student as partner. The partners read aloud to each other or retell their favorite tale. The rest of the allotted time is spent planning the collaborative research paper (Figure 2).

On day five, the secondary students plan and organize their part of the research paper. Elementary students practice "Here Comes Peter Cottontail" and plan a Peter Rabbit puppet show or Wide Story production. When the initial plans have been completed for the puppet show or Wide Story, the class should continue practicing "Here Comes Peter Cottontail." The secondary students continue to work on their research paper on day six and begin a story/character map. Elementary students will continue to work on their puppet show or Wide Story and the teacher will read aloud another tale.

Day seven is another collaborative day with both groups meeting together. Both groups work on the research paper, design

book jackets, and begin to plan for the culminating activity, Peter Rabbit Day (Figure 3).

On day eight, secondary students work on their book jacket and book ad, and begin work on creating bag activities (students create games and other activities and place them in a bag they have decorated) for the elementary students. The younger children will continue to work on their production and also make handbills and signs advertising their show. When they complete their work, the teacher will lead them in "The Bunny Hop" dance.

Day nine has the secondary students creating a new story or an extension of a tale; elementary students will illustrate the story. Secondary students will continue to work on bag activities. The elementary students will also create a new story, read it to their secondary partner, and have them illustrate it. Elementary students also create bag activities for the secondary students.

Day ten is another collaborative day with both groups meeting. Students will continue working on the research paper and Peter Rabbit Day. The final part of the day will be sharing the bag activities.

On day eleven, secondary students create a game for elementary students. The younger children continue working on their puppet show or Wide Story, sing "Here Comes Peter Cottontail," and listen to the teacher read another tale. Secondary students finish their game on day twelve and work on Peter Rabbit Day. Elementary students practice their production and The Bunny Hop, and listen to another tale read by their teacher.

For day thirteen, secondary students continue to work on Peter

Rabbit Day and create a book response (Figure 4). Elementary students also work on Peter Rabbit Day, listen to another tale, and fill out a literature report card. Secondary students finish their part of Peter Rabbit Day on day fourteen, and elementary students practice their puppet show or wide story, "Here Comes Peter Cottontail" and The Bunny Hop.

Day fifteen is the final collaborative meeting and is celebrated by Peter Rabbit Day Festivities, and Day sixteen is the final wrap-up for both classes. Secondary and elementary students write descriptive stories or response papers narrating their impressions of the unit, or may write, as a group, a story for a local newspaper describing their experiences. As a final project, both sets of students write thank you letters to their partners and make suggestions or comments regarding their opinions of the unit and suggest possible topics for another collaborative project.

Grading

Because this is a thematic unit, it is assumed that both teachers will be incorporating language arts skills normally taught (writing, spelling, usage, punctuation, etc.) within this unit as activities are completed. It is also assumed that the elementary teacher will incorporate this unit into the regular language arts instruction block. However, there are many possibilities for the elementary teacher to incorporate several subjects--perhaps history or science--into the teaching of this project.

The grading for this unit should follow the teacher's normal requirements and grading scale. Students should be graded upon participation and the quality of the activities completed. There

are no quizzes or a final test over the unit because there is a dearth of activities provided that will allow for quality evaluation of each student. A natural conclusion to the project is to ask for student input regarding it; both elementary and secondary students will be able to suggest many thoughtful changes, additional activities, or topics for subsequent units.

Conclusion

Although time-consuming and sometimes difficult to plan, cross-age projects more than make up for their troubles to teachers in student enjoyment, empowerment, and achievement. They are truly enjoyable projects for both teachers and students, and are well worth implementing in the classroom.

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Figure 1

Introduce project Read Tale of Peter Rabbit Write intro letters to elementary students	Read stories out loud in small groups. Group selects favorite to read to class TEACHER READS----------	Small groups continue with reading Bionoem/cinquain	*********SCHOOL********** INTRODUCTIONS READ ALOUD WITH PARTNER PLAN RESEARCH PAPER *********SCHOOL**********
Introduce project Read Tale of Peter Rabbit Write intro letters to secondary students	Design a book kite Vocabulary Teacher reads Benjamin Bunny	Learn the song, "Here Comes Peter Cottontail" Venn diagram--compare Peter with Benjamin Bunny	
Organize research paper TEACHER READS----------	Work on research paper Story/character map	**********SCHOOL********** WORK ON RESEARCH PAPER BOOK JACKETS PLAN PETER RABBIT DAY **********SCHOOL**********	Design book jacket and book ad Bag activity TEACHER READS----------
Start planning Peter Rabbit puppet show or wide story Sing "Here Comes Peter Cottontail"	Design and make puppets, stage, scenery, etc. Teacher reads another tale		Continue working on puppet show Learn "The Bunny Hop"

Figure 1, cont.

Create a new story--elem. illustrate Work on bag activities TEACHER READS----------	**********SCHOOL********** PLAN RESEARCH PAPER PLAN PETER RABBIT DAY BAG ACTIVITIES **********SCHOOL**********	Create game TEACHER READS----------	Finish game Work on Peter Rabbit Day
Create a new story--sec: illustrate Bag activity		Continue working on puppet show Sing "Here Comes Peter Cottontail" Teacher reads another tale	Practice the puppet show Practice the Bunny Hop Teacher reads another tale
Work on Peter Rabbit Day Book response TEACHER READS----------	Work on Peter Rabbit Day	**********SCHOOL********** PETER RABBIT DAY **********SCHOOL**********	Write descriptive stories or write for newspaper Write final thank-you letter to elementary students
Work on Peter Rabbit Day Fill out literature report card Teacher reads another tale	Practice puppet show or wide story Practice "Here Comes Peter Cottontail" and the Bunny Hop		Write a language experience story or newspaper article Write final thank-you letter to secondary students

Figure 2

RESEARCH PAPER

Students are divided into groups containing both elementary and secondary pupils. Each group receives at least two topics to research. Groups decide how to research their topics. When the entire classes meet, all of the information gathered will be presented by each group in turn.

Topics to be considered:

1. Beatrix Potter's life, family, friends, events
2. Country/town Beatrix Potter is from including customs, lifestyle during her lifetime, climate, other famous people who lived during her lifetime
3. Current events in world/country during Beatrix Potter's lifetime
4. How/why Beatrix Potter began writing, what was written, illustrated, dates of writings
5. What critics, public said about stories, how they were received, current readership/popularity
6. Products featuring Beatrix Potter's works in stores (stuffed animals, sheets, placemats, etc.)
7. Complete list of works, drawings
8. List of works not featuring Peter Rabbit and friends
9. Beatrix Potter's descendants, current state of her home(s), etc.
10. How are Beatrix Potter's works being published today? By whom? What is most popular? Out of print?
11. Information about <u>The Tale of Peter Rabbit</u>
12. Information about any other work/story
13. Poll of how many pieces by Beatrix Potter are owned by students and teachers

Figure 3

PETER RABBIT DAY

Many possible activities are listed. Elementary and secondary students select the ones they wish to include.

1. Meal--recipes, menu, placemats, invitations, centerpiece
2. Write a story or poem about Peter Rabbit
3. Write an original recipe that Peter might like
4. Chapter-shaped book
5. Cookies or jello jigglers using rabbit-shaped cookie cutters, or use construction paper to decorate pretend cookies
6. Games
7. Puppet show (by elementary students)
8. Skits--such as a wide story, choral reading, or reader's theater
9. Peter's present--wrapped with a list of clues describing contents
10. Songs, such as "Here Comes Peter Cottontail"
11. Bunny Hop
12. Movie, videos
13. Present research paper, book ads, jackets
14. Elementary students dress as characters from stories
15. Read favorite stories out loud
16. Make bunny cake
17. Scavenger hunt
18. Language experience story or article for school or local newspaper about the event
19. Sensory activity--use the senses and examine the following: sage, thyme, mint, rosemary, camomile tea, and rabbit tobacco (lavender)

Figure 4

BOOK REVIEW/RESPONSE

Students should answer the following questions about any story/piece that has been read. Questions may be answered orally or on paper.

Select 7 to respond to:

1. What is your first reaction after reading this story?
2. What feelings did the story evoke in you?
3. Who was your favorite character? Why?
4. Was there a character you disliked? Who?
5. Do you resemble any character in the story? Who? How?
6. After reading the story, what memories do you recall?
7. How are the illustrations helpful to the story?
8. Which illustration was your favorite? Why?
9. What was your favorite part of the story? Why?
10. Do you have any questions about the story? What?
11. What is the main point or moral of the story?
12. Does this story remind you of other stories you read during your childhood? Explain.
13. Does this story remind you of other stories or novels you have recently read? Explain.
14. Would you recommend this story to a friend? Explain.